

Apocalypticism

MaryElizabeth Royce (She/Her/Hers)

Hi, I'm MaryElizabeth. I go by She/Her pronouns and will be speaking on the topic of apocalypticism, specifically where it occurs in the gospel of Matthew.

There are multiple connotations and interpretations surrounding the word "apocalypse." I will attempt to break down its understanding. I'll begin with the linguistic roots of the word and follow the historical significance of apocalypticism so that it can effectively apply to biblical texts and Judaism.

An apocalypse is firstly, something of a disclosure of heavenly secrets through visions. The seer of said vision is validated in undergoing suffering and hardships within their specific religious group. Apocalyptic is the adjective that describes what is revealed through these visions. The apocalyptic eschatology of "end time" events helps explain where, in accordance to a divine plane, the present world will end within the genre of apocalypse.

Apocalypses deal with heavenly works, astronomy, history, and human destiny (Carey, 190). The origin of "apocalypse" comes from the Greek root *apokalypsis*, meaning revelation and disclosure.

Here is where things get tricky. Apocalypse is a genre. Apocalypticism is an ideological term. Apocalypse can be divided into two defining categories similarly to how fiction can be science fiction and literary fiction. These two categories are "apocalyptic eschatology" and "apocalypticism." The genre of "apocalypse" can be understood as a genre of revelatory literature that contains a narrative framework. Within this framework, a revelation is mediated by the supernatural upon a human recipient (Collins, 510). Apocalypticism, as an ideology, appears in Judaism as something indecisive with lucrative literary origins. In Second Temple Judaism, apocalypticism is a term used to refer to "a social movement, a system of thought, and a spiritual movement (510)."

A prophet is generally the author of apocalyptic literature. That work is called an apocalypse. The first attested use of the word was the opening line of the book of Revelation. The genre existed prior to this book, but wasn't labeled "apocalypse" explicitly.

The line of Revelation reads, “the *apokalypsis* of Jesus Christ.” Revelation is the book attributed to the most obvious display of apocalypticism as it influenced expanding Western civilizations. The apocalypticism that existed in Revelation embraced concepts of visions, epistles, and blessings. In short, it is a divine call to heaven.

Aside from Revelation, other biblical texts with apocalyptic ideologies are the gospels of the NT, and chapters within Daniel, Genesis, and Isaiah (Grayson, 509). The apocalypses of Enoch, found within various Dead Sea Scrolls, are also influential in inspiring early Jewish apocalyptic movements. In Daniel and Enoch, the apocalyptic worldview that is discussed is that “human life is ruled by the warring spirits of light and darkness (Collins, 515).” There is an ongoing eschatological war for complete rule between the sons of light and dark, fought through human vessels. Each of these literary references confirm the existence of a divine intervention and a final judgement.

Apocalyptic eschatology holds a certain pride in its belief of prophecies. The core of the ideology was that the judgement of the current world would favor those of faith. These people of faith were the righteous. All others were the wicked. The people of faith believed that from extreme suffering came due reward. This worldview within Judaism believed in judgement that stretched beyond death and that supernatural entities influenced human lives. An evil and dark present may have a glorious future through hope and faith, representing an eschatological expectation of apocalypticism (Carey, 190).

Apocalypticism is not meant to be “a flight from reality, rather it is a way of coping with reality by providing a meaningful framework by which humans can make decisions (Collins, 516).” Therefore, the social setting of the apocalyptic movements depended on some form of alienation of a religious community. A crisis hits and persecution is inevitable (516).

The apocalyptic teachings of Jesus were discussed in scholarly discourse in the 19th century. Jesus did not teach explicitly in the genre, but instead proclaimed that God was near at hand in death. God and Jesus could therefore be viewed as prophetic symbols of restoration. In Matthew, there are narrative accounts that favor Jesus’ apocalyptic teachings. These include Satan testing Jesus, his wisdom sayings and parables, and his prophetic claims. Each of these are consistent with literary apocalypses. These narratives

are consistent with the gospel of Mark, which is one of the two main sources for the book of Matthew.

Matthew 8:11-12 reads:

“I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Here, Jesus evoked the eschatological hope of the restoration of those in exile as well as eschatological punishment. Instances of “gnashing of teeth” occur frequently in the gospel of Matthew whenever Jesus referenced apocalypticism. The gnashing of teeth indicated anger and frustration, judgement, and condemnation.

Matthew 24 and 25 also hold apocalyptic teachings from Jesus. In particular, the parable of the faithful servant at the end of chapter 24 reads:

“Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this...”

Again, the use of darkness, weeping, and the gnashing of teeth is incorporated as a way to emphasize the divide between those of faith and the wicked. Not everyone will be saved. This parable is about how community leaders are responsible for keeping followers faithful until Jesus’ return and the consequences for falling away from faith.

In these two examples, Matthew modifies the source of Mark in favor of an apocalyptic reading. Matthew added elements of apocalyptic visions and discourses (Yarbro Collins,

520). The result is a “fulfillment” of an apocalyptic scenario. The faithful are saved and the wicked, faithless are cast aside. When Jesus is raised from the dead in chapter 27, his death and resurrection mark a transition in apocalypticism as others will be raised in turn. The dead rising symbolizes that belief in life after death (Wimbush, 67). “Apocalypticism, therefore, was the vehicle that early Christians used to articulate their deepest convictions about the ultimate significance of Jesus Christ in the divine purposes (Carey, 192).”

In thinking about apocalypticism and the historical eschatology that surrounds it, Judaism holds an “expectation of post-modern reward and punishment (Himmelfarb, 693)” in its worldview. So, apocalypticism is a worldview and ideology of thought that influences social interactions and is not the modern-day idea of total world annihilation.

Here are my works cited and thank you so much for listening.

Works Cited

Carey, Greg. “Apocalypticism.” In *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 190-195, Vol. 2. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.

Collins, John. “Apocalypse: Early Jewish Apocalypticism” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 509-516. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Gale, Aaron M. “The Gospel According to Matthew.” In *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, 9-66. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Grayson, A. Kirk. “Apocalypse: Akkadian Apocalyptic Literature.” In *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 508-509. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Hanson, Paul. “Apocalypse: The Genre.” In *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 504-506. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Hanson, Paul. “Apocalypse: Introductory Overview.” In *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 506-508. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Himmelfarb, Martha. "Afterlife and Resurrection." In *Early Second Temple Judaism*, 691-695. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Wimbush, Vincent. "Afterlife." In *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 68, Vol. 2. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.

Yarbro Collins, Adela. "Apocalypse: Early Christian." In *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 517-523. New York: Doubleday, 1992.